

Article by Fiona Neilson

THE SECRET RIVER

Kate Grenville

INTRODUCTION

Kate Grenville is an established Australian writer who has won national and international literary prizes. She has focused on Australian themes in a number of her texts, such as *The Idea of Perfection* (1999) and *Joan Makes History* (1988), which imagines life at the time of Australian colonisation.

The Secret River provides an imaginative staging of the encounter between white colonisers and Indigenous inhabitants. It paints a vivid picture of the cultural dislocation that the settlers experienced when they encountered a situation for which they had no concepts to aid in understanding. Using archival material that she gathered during her research, Grenville based the text on events that actually happened and used dialogue from court transcripts, newspapers and early settlers' accounts of life in New South Wales.

This work of historical fiction aims to provide readers with an understanding of what the first encounters between white settlers and Indigenous inhabitants were like, and in doing so fill in some of the silences that surround this aspect of our colonial history. The text subtly paints a picture of this passage in history, helping us understand contemporary race relations and providing a context for the issue of reconciliation, without being overtly political or moralistic.

Encountering Conflict in The Secret River

'Conflict' involves the clash of interests, ideas and expectations. It can also mean a fight or a struggle, ranging from a battle or violent clash between armies to antagonism between two people. In *The Secret River*, conflict takes many forms, from bloody disputes over territory between whites and blacks, to the discrepancy in opinions about an ideal place to settle down for Sal and William Thornhill.

To 'encounter' means to come upon or meet with, especially unexpectedly. It may refer to a chance meeting, or it may mean a meeting between adversaries. It does not only refer to meetings between people, but also covers meeting ideas, as in 'he encountered that attitude for the first time'. Many forms of encounter occur in *The Secret River*, from those at the personal level such as meetings between the white settlers and Indigenous inhabitants of NSW, and William's encounters with the legal system, to the clash of ideas. Sal and William, with their expectations of life in the colony as an extension of their life in England, abruptly encounter the reality of an alien landscape and their status as outsiders.

The Secret River shows how, fundamentally, conflict is what occurs when different goals, expectations and understandings collide. Encounters with conflict thus signify these points of collision. The basic plot of *The Secret River* involves characters forced into criminality out of desperation to survive, who are then transported to a harsh foreign environment where a nascent society struggles to establish rules and boundaries. Given this, it is not surprising to see numerous encounters with conflict. Any investigation of *Encountering Conflict* needs to consider the different types of conflict that occur in the text, and how the protagonists or characters deal with them.

Conflict may be positive, but it depends on the consequences. If it serves to bring about a realisation that was previously lacking, or change that was needed, then it can be positive. However, if differences are not resolved and grievances are exacerbated by conflict, then its legacy can be negative. Consider how history proceeds from the historical conflicts described in *The Secret River*: no really positive effects can be said to have occurred for the Indigenous people at either the time of settlement or subsequently. The Indigenous people were forced to share the land on white people's terms. Their population was ravaged by previously unknown diseases and their culture treated with ignorance and disrespect. As a result, the Indigenous people can clearly be seen to have emerged the worse from the clash between their culture and that of the British colonisers.

IDEAS & ARGUMENTS IN THE TEXT

The Secret River advances a number of key ideas relevant to the Context *Encountering Conflict*. These are outlined below and will be developed further in the following section.

Overview of key ideas and arguments

New environments create conflict

A change in circumstances unsettles people's certainties and opens up the potential for new power relations and sets of rules. People cope in different ways when faced with an alien environment. The establishment of new territories through colonisation initiates social change and forces pioneering settlers to work out new ways of living in society.

National identity is born out of conflict

The struggles that take place between different groups of people, such as colonisers and colonised, and the struggles of groups who try to overcome harsh natural conditions, shape national identity.

Conflict is a clash of expectations

We all hold expectations about what our lives should be like. What happens when the expectations clash with a vastly different reality? Or when we meet other people with conflicting expectations? Some people try to hold onto their expectations and deliberately close their eyes to the existence of any reality other than their own. This can have fatal consequences.

Social hierarchies create conflict

Class and society are structures that hold people together in communities. Sometimes these divisions cause resentment, particularly when one section of a community is oppressed by another, and when power is not evenly distributed amongst social members. Entire societies can be based on an unfair distribution of power, which is enforced by laws that discriminate against specific groups of people.

Transgression as a source of conflict

Conflict can arise when social taboos are transgressed, such as when whites mix with blacks in a context of strict racial segregation. What are the social codes that govern our existence, and what happens when we break them and behave in unacceptable ways? Who has the authority to set these codes in the first place, and what exactly is being threatened when they are not followed?

Conflict is a fear of difference

Why do people find it hard to tolerate difference? When people act differently from others, or set different rules and codes to live by, some people feel threatened. Sometimes there may be more similarities than differences between people, but their inability to understand these can contribute to misunderstanding and conflict. Concepts such as exoticism are used to explain some groups of people to others, allowing them to avoid having to engage with their own cultural specificity.

Miscommunication creates conflict

In order for understanding to take place, communication needs to flow from one set of people to another and back again. When one side does not understand another, because they do not speak the same language, for example, or hold the same values, and where fear and cynicism about the other side's motives are involved, conflict can arise rapidly.

Analysis of key ideas and arguments***New environments create conflict***

When people move to new environments, which may be geographical, political, ideological or cultural, the stress of change and the difficulties of adaptation can provide the context for conflict. The establishment of a new society in a foreign setting raises all sorts of questions about how to adapt to the new circumstances. The colonisation of the new land of NSW is the impetus behind William Thornhill's voyage and the generator of the story of the Indigenous encounter with the British settlers. It raises issues of national identity, the creation of history and territorialism. As a historical phenomenon it generated conflict, and has done so in most areas of the world where it has occurred.

Sydney Cove 'had only one purpose: to be a container for those condemned by His Majesty's courts' (p.75). *The Secret River* explains how the economic success of the colony is founded on the labour of the felons. The attitude of the settlers is that the land is there for the taking:

All a person need do was find a place no one had already taken. Plant a crop, build a hut, call the place Smith's or Flanagan's, and out-stare anyone who said otherwise (p.121).

Yet at the same time, settlers such as Thornhill are made aware of the pre-existence of Indigenous people. The piles of oyster shells (p.101) and the established habits of the Aborigines show that they have been on the land for generations, and that they are not necessarily nomadic and unattached to particular places, as white settlers would like to believe. Sal realises this when she finally visits the Aboriginal settlement near theirs: '*They was here ... Their grannies and their great grannies. All along*' (p.288). However, this is a truth that the whites prefer to ignore.

Conflict occurs when the fact of existing Indigenous occupation interferes with the whites' notion that the land is free for the taking. In spite of the Aborigines' resistance to white incursions, shown by their attempts to fight settlers and sabotage their crops, the British government empowers the colonisers in their desire for expansion by supplying them with soldiers for protection and also by providing them with the legal right to kill Aborigines who resist white settlement (pp.265–7). In the name of the British Empire, the colonisers are provided with resources and laws that sanction their enterprise.

Central to the concept of colonialism is the idea of the frontier, of the edge of the known world and the site on which the occupying civilisation seeks to perpetuate itself. Yet the concept of a 'known' world that exists alongside an 'unknown' one is problematic. As illustrated, there is a disjunction or an incompatibility between the white settlers' concept of a virginal new world that is ready for them to take over, and the existence of Indigenous dwellers. The settlers' refusal or inability to acknowledge the rights of the land's original inhabitants shows their ignorance and arrogance. Although Thornhill does not ever fully grasp the complexity of the relationship between settlers and Indigenous inhabitants, he does realise that he cannot ignore the Aborigines' presence. 'It took him sometime to admit to himself that his hundred acres no

longer felt quite his own' (p.198). At the end of the novel, he finds himself hoping to catch a glimpse of the local Indigenous people, to assuage his guilt at his role in their dispersal.

Discussion questions

- What does colonialism involve, and what are some of the problems that arise when land that the colonisers want to use is already occupied?
- '*The Secret River* is not so much about a dispute over land as about a clash of concepts regarding the relationship that people have with the land.' Discuss this topic in groups.
- Discuss the different attitudes towards the blacks that the settlers hold. At what points does conflict arise?

National identity is born out of conflict

The construction of Australian national identity is rooted in this conflict between previous and new inhabitants – or invaders, as some would term them. The historical conflict that the novel deals with imaginatively has to this day not been fully resolved. Contemporary Australia is currently preoccupied with whether to say sorry to Indigenous people for various outrages visited upon them, which is a concern of the Reconciliation movement. Landmark decisions in courts over the past few decades, which recognise Indigenous ownership of land appropriated by colonisers, are only now starting to address problems which are as old as Australian colonisation. The issues about how contemporary Australian society can live with Indigenous society, and what forms of cooperation this should take, are matters of ongoing debate.

Discussion question

- How does conflict play a role in the establishment of national identity?

Conflict is a clash of expectations

When people start to develop expectations of how their life should unfold, but their life does not meet these expectations, the disparity between the hoped-for goals and reality can cause personal conflict. Thornhill provides a clear example of how conflicting understandings of his social role and trajectory can create a personal dilemma.

Thornhill's first aspiration is to belong in Sal's family's house in Swan Lane (p.17), as it represents a more comfortable lifestyle and secure family environment. Later, when he has the opportunity to become an apprentice waterman, he jumps at the chance because he realises that it will enable him to earn a living and survive. As he explains, 'All the closed doors of his life might spring open from this day forward' (p.26). He sees his subsequent marriage and progress as 'the reward for a man's labour' (p.38), which shows us that he understands life to be a system where, if you invest in it through hard work, you will be rewarded.

However, 'Thornhill's world cracked and broke' (p.40) following the unexpected death of Sal's parents, and he and Sal are thrown into poverty. Thornhill not only has to face the problems of how to survive and provide for his family, but also has to cope with their new life of poverty. This is particularly difficult as he believed he had left this kind of life behind him for good when he became an apprentice. It involves a readjustment of his expectations.

In the new settlement of NSW, however, Thornhill soon realises that he can take advantage of the situation. He works for Mr King, earning good money moving goods illegally. He then realises that his collaboration with Blackwood transporting goods to and from Sydney is a potential goldmine. Thornhill exploits these changed circumstances and, with Sal's encouragement and advice, sets himself up as a boat proprietor on the river – an idea that obviously rewards him financially, as we see at the end of the text.

Although Thornhill adapts to the new circumstances, Sal continues to use London as her point of reference, and to compare every aspect of their new habitat with it. She thus sets up expectations of life in the colony that constantly relate to their former life back home, and uses her ideals about the kind of life

that she wants to lead, which includes a comfortable old age, to drive her goals for them in NSW. Sal experiences personal conflict when her expectations are not met. For a long while, she cheerfully ignores the reality of the settlement, focusing on the town and its connections to the old country, while literally turning her back on the bushland that proves that they are in a foreign land. It is only late in the text that Sal faces the reality of their situation, understanding the blacks' permanency for the first time (pp.286–91). This causes her to issue Will with an ultimatum – either make them safe or take them back to the town – which in turn creates conflict in their relationship, and pushes Will to take part in the massacre. The outcome of this particular conflict has far-reaching and deadly consequences.

Discussion question

- What are different expectations of the main characters, and how do these change as the novel progresses? What are some examples of conflicting expectations?

Social hierarchies create conflict

Social hierarchies maintain a set of established power relations and networks of influence. These may operate around a simple, stark division, such as that between a master and slave, or they may be complex and multi-layered, such as the intricate Indian caste system. They are maintained through institutions such as the monarchy, the political system, the church and the education system. Social divisions have the potential to create conflict when one set of people feels they are being discriminated against or treated unfairly.

Class structures underpin the social conflict in *The Secret River*. Part One, 'London', introduces readers to the strict social demarcations or divisions operating in 18th century England. As Thornhill describes it, society is hierarchical, with 'the King, or God, at the top' (p.26), followed by gentry, who range from uncaring toffs to decent types such as Captain Watson, then all the people below them. Although this appears to have been an accepted social order, crime arose when the underclass became too severely oppressed and disadvantaged to stay within its bounds. As a result of the excess of criminality, aided in part by severe sentences for what we would today consider minor offences, such as the theft of bread to feed a family, the colonies became

necessary to house the huge number of criminals who could no longer be accommodated in Britain itself.

Class structures serve to maintain distinctions between people and can both create and prevent conflict. Conflict arises when the underclass starts to bitterly resent the superior classes, particularly when they flaunt their higher social status as, for example, when Captain Suckling comments on the flies at the wharf and reminds Will that he is a former convict (pp.172–3). One of the advantages of class structures is that they provide modes of behaviour for people that maintain social order. On the other hand, class differences can cause conflict when citizens such as William Thornhill question why they are kept in a lower position when they are working harder than others, or when the usual social markers are faded or blurry, especially in the new and unfamiliar situation of the colony.

Notice how many of the British settlers absorb the Australian natives into their understanding of class structure. Those who are lowest on the rung of colonial society, the convicts and emancipists, are delighted to place the Aborigines even lower than them, which gives rise to some very cruel practices. Smasher provides the best example of a person low in the established social hierarchy who relishes the power that he believes he holds over the blacks. Colonial society provides his disturbingly sadistic tendencies with an outlet, and unfortunately Aborigines suffer at his hands until he is finally killed. Note also how Thornhill likens the Aborigines at times to gentry, because of their apparent life of leisure and ability to feed themselves with minimal effort. In both cases, white settlers explain the Aborigines to themselves in terms of British social structures, and are unable to conceive of any other way of relating to them.

Discussion question

- Discuss the role of class structures in both creating and preventing conflict.

Transgression as a source of conflict

People can become upset and feel threatened when codes of behaviour are flouted or ignored. Transgression occurs whenever an agreed-upon rule is broken. These rules often remain taken for granted and invisible until the moment when someone questions them, and it seems all the more shocking for those who witness the transgression. Taboos and codes of conduct govern every aspect of our lives, including our sexuality, our politics, our beliefs and ethics and our attitudes towards other people.

An important source of conflict amongst the settler community in *The Secret River* is interracial contact. Attitudes tend to be conservative, with the majority of people considering the Aborigines savages who have no relation to white society. In the more extreme cases, the blacks are seen as beasts to be hunted and maltreated, which is Smasher's attitude. In town, Scabby Bill is tolerated as an entertaining and harmless oddity. On the frontier up the Hawkesbury River, there are more tolerant attitudes, particularly those of Mrs Herring and Charles Blackwood. Blackwood has actually had a child with an Indigenous woman and is one of the few settlers whom we encounter who lives peaceably with the Aboriginal inhabitants. However, Blackwood attracts the ire of some of the other settlers for this, because he has transgressed the social boundaries prevalent in their community. At several points Blackwood and some of the other settlers have heated arguments about how to treat the Aborigines. Ultimately, Blackwood becomes the target for white discontent and anger and the Indigenous people on his land are brutally attacked, leaving Blackwood a broken man.

Conflict is a fear of difference

Why do people's differences pose such a threat? Throughout history, people have fought and killed one another because they were different, due to their ethnic background, sexuality, religion, skin colour, beliefs or habits. Unfortunately, aggression, rather than acceptance and tolerance, is still a common response to people's difference.

The fear of the Aborigines' difference in the text can be discussed with the concept of otherness. Otherness is a concept that the settlers hold and which shapes their attitude towards the Indigenous inhabitants of the land. As described in the preceding sections, the majority of settlers do not have any way of properly understanding either the Aborigines or their culture. They are faced with an entirely different culture and with humans who have very different external physical characteristics to them. Their response is either to see the Aborigines as savages, and therefore as inconsequential as animals, or to absorb them into their social structure by placing them at the bottom of the pecking order. Unlike today's society, which teaches concepts of multiculturalism and pluralism, encouraging us to engage with and accept other people's differences, as well as their many similarities, Australian colonial society of the early 19th century had a very condescending and arrogant attitude of superiority towards native cultures.

A fear of difference and the unknown underlies much of this attitude, and perhaps takes us to the heart of the interracial conflict in *The Secret River*. This lack of understanding manifests itself in various ways, the most obvious being Smasher's sadistically cruel behaviour towards any Aborigine unfortunate enough to cross his path. There are also more subtle ways in which a lack of understanding is shown, such as the attitude that the Indigenous inhabitants are exotic. Sal has heard from Mrs Herring that the British gentry will pay good money for curios, so she starts bargaining for small objects made by the local natives (p.201). Although this attitude is not openly destructive in the way that Smasher's is, it nevertheless suggests that the Indigenous people are a novelty, similar to freaks in circus sideshows. It does not allow for an understanding that would consider Indigenous culture equally as important as European culture. It is this inability to comprehend that Indigenous people have meaningful traditions and complex social structures that led to their removal from the land, and later to the removal of their children. These practices attempted to destroy Aboriginal cultures and induct Aborigines into white culture.

Discussion question

- In what ways is it harmful to treat Indigenous peoples as exotic?

Miscommunication creates conflict

Communication relates to the ideas of difference and otherness, and is another area in which conflict arises. *The Secret River* shows how miscommunication occurs not just due to a lack of shared language and vocabulary, but also through a lack of shared concepts. A lack of understanding can lead to conflict. One example is the myth that circulates about the blacks being cannibals (p.79), which serves to create fear and stir up distrust amongst whites. This example of newspaper reporting illustrates again how a lack of information can contribute towards fear: 'The *Gazette* had a handy expression that covered all the things the blacks did, and suggested others: *outrages and depredations*' (p.95). Another example, which this time shows how successful communication can prevent conflict, is William Thornhill's 'conversation' with Whisker Harry (p.197), during which some kind of understanding appears to be reached, even though it is far from clear exactly what that is. It represents a step towards successful communication and cooperation.

There is another issue related to communication and conflict, and that is the 'space of silence between husband and wife' (p.324) that William comments has grown between him and Sal since the massacre. 'He had not thought that words unsaid could come between two people like a body of water' (p.324). This does not represent an actual conflict between them but it does show an agreement not to raise topics that they know they will disagree on. It illustrates their strategy for avoiding conflict. Dick's behaviour in leaving the Thornhills soon after the massacre (p.326) to take up residence with Blackwood similarly shows an avoidance of overt conflict. It also reveals how Dick opposes his father's actions and is a way of registering this opposition.

Discussion question

- How does miscommunication occur in the text? What are the consequences?

Points of view on the Context

These discussion topics, writing topics and activities function to stimulate your thoughts about the Context *Encountering Conflict* in *The Secret River* and will help you to develop your own ideas and points of view on the text.

Discussion/writing topics

- Conflict can create a legacy of tragedy.
- The inability to communicate creates a potential conflict.
- History is shaped by conflict.
- Conflict is more likely to occur when reality doesn't meet our expectations.
- Silence may indicate an underlying conflict.

Activities

- Discuss the different social positions of characters in the text. How do you think their actions towards others are shaped by this class structure? At what points does class cause conflict between individuals? Aside from class, are there any other social divisions that have the potential to cause conflict?
- The language barrier provides an obvious impediment to communication between the settlers and Aborigines. Find examples of both when this barrier provokes conflict and when people manage to overcome it. What are other types of communication barriers, either in the text or in general?

Writing in Context: Sample topics

Students will be assessed in Units 3 and 4 and in the end of year examination on writing stimulated by the ideas and arguments found in texts studied in the Context *Encountering Conflict*. The following topics provide an opportunity for students to draw on ideas arising from their reading of *The Secret River* in order to develop their own writing pieces. Written responses may be expository, persuasive or imaginative.

- 1 'There is always more than one side to any conflict.'
- 2 'Encounters with conflict arise from miscommunication.'
- 3 'Societies that have experienced historical conflict learn how to create social harmony.'
- 4 'At the heart of conflict is fear.'
- 5 'Sometimes we need to close our eyes and minds to reality if we want to avoid conflict.'

THE TEXT

Grenville, Kate 2005, *The Secret River*, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne.

OTHER RESOURCES

Indigenous Australia website,
<http://www.dreamtime.net.au/indigenous/index.cfm>

Kate Grenville's personal site, including Notes for Readers,
<http://www.users.bigpond.com/kgrenville/>

Links to reviews of *The Secret River*,
http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/secret_river/

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fiona Neilson holds a PhD in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies from Monash University. She lectures annually at Hamilton College and has written four text guides for Insight Publications. Currently she is researching and writing on contemporary French literature.